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AUTHOR Maxson, Jan
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ABSTRACT

The School of Communications at the University of Washington initiated the Journalism and Trauma program in 1994 so that all of its journalism graduates would be informed about trauma and would consider how to interview and write about victims without doing further harm to them. The program adapts learning objectives of the pioneer Victims and the Media program in the Michigan State University School of Journalism. During a workshop, students learn about trauma and its symptoms, practice interviewing actors playing people who may be experiencing trauma, and learn how to cope with their own stress. A study assessed the effectiveness of the trauma training program for recent journalism graduates to learn how many were exposed in some degree to traumatic events in their work; to find out how the trauma training (if they received it) has helped graduates to be more effective journalists; and to ask for suggestions to improve the trauma program for future students. A survey questionnaire was mailed to 214 journalism graduates from the years 1994-1997. Of the 82 replies, those 42 graduates who worked in journalism were interviewed by telephone--14 had participated in the trauma training. Results indicated that all graduates see trauma training as a worthwhile exercise for journalism students, and that the majority of graduates had been exposed to traumatic incidents in their job assignments. Responses suggest the need for more professional support for the personal trauma journalists may experience. (Contains a figure and a 4-item bibliography.) (NKA)

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"Training Journalism Students to Deal With Trauma"

By
Jan Maxson

The University of Washington
School of Communications

Box 353740
Seattle WA 98195-3740

(206) 543-2660

jmaxson@u.washington.edu

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Training Journalism Students to Deal With Trauma

by Jan Maxson

Background

Violence and disaster are increasingly popular topics for media coverage. The assignment brings journalists face-to-face with people newly wounded by human cruelty and acts of nature. For a new reporter, who has just completed journalism training, it is difficult to know what to expect in such emotional situations. Many new graduates, while they are keenly aware of the distress of victims (some of whom will suffer long-term effects), feel ill prepared for assignments that ask them to confront suffering people.

The School of Communications at the University of Washington initiated the Journalism and Trauma program in 1994 so that all of its journalism graduates would be informed about trauma and would consider how to interview and write about victims without doing further harm to them. The program adapts learning objectives of the pioneer Victims and the Media program in the Michigan State University School of Journalism. During a workshop of four to six hours, Washington journalism students learn about trauma and its symptoms, practice interviewing actors playing people who may be experiencing trauma, and learn how to cope with their own stress.

The training, typically, is directed by the faculty member who administers the program, assisted by a journalist with experience dealing with trauma victims, a clinician with a background in victim issues and a survivor of life-threatening assault. The workshop includes background on the secondary trauma journalists, themselves, may experience. Although the workshop is given to all print journalism majors, some students

miss it because of illness or other reasons or they voluntarily miss it at our suggestion because of personal traumatic experience.

This study, conducted in the fall 1998, assessed the effectiveness of the trauma training program for recent journalism graduates. The purpose was threefold: to learn how many graduates were exposed in some degree to traumatic events in their work; to find out how the trauma training (if they received it) has helped graduates to be more effective journalists, and to ask for suggestions to improve the trauma program for future students.

Background Literature

The value of trauma training for journalism students recently has been suggested by articles in a number of journalism oriented publications. Nieman Reports in the Fall of 1996 devoted an issue to various aspects of covering trauma including Frank Ochberg's "Primer on Covering Victims (Interviewing Victims with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)" which gave background to journalists when dealing with the victims of trauma. Ochberg's article suggests that reporters should be sensitive to the possibility of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its symptoms when interviewing crime and disaster victims. According to Ochberg, PTSD symptoms such as detachment, fear, panic, shames, and anger, can lead to a difficult and sometimes traumatic interview. Ochberg urges awareness within the press community of the issues of trauma survivors so that journalists would not further traumatize victims.

Other articles examine the effects that covering trauma can have on the reporters themselves. Charolotte Aiken's "Reporters Are Victims, Too," also in the Fall 1996 issue of Nieman Reports, told of Aiken's personal experience covering the bombing of the

Oklahoma City Federal Building. The article described the short term and long term emotional effects the event had on her own life. "Confronting the Horror" by Sherry Ricchiardi, in the January/February 1999 issue of American Journalism Review looks at how covering tragedy can create immense psychological stress for journalists. "An Exploratory Study of Traumatic Stress Among Newspaper Journalists," in Journalism and Communication Monographs (March, 1999), includes observations by researchers Roger Simpson and James Boggs concerning how journalists covering trauma are strikingly similar to public safety workers in both their experiences and their emotional responses. All of the above studies point to the emotional difficulty reporters may experience when covering traumatic events. These articles stress the value of awareness of trauma issues both for the sake of trauma survivors and the reporters who interview them.

The Questionnaire

A letter was sent to 214 journalism graduates from the years 1994-1997. The letter, which asked the graduate to list the jobs held since graduation, served as a screening. Of the 82 replies, those 42 graduates who had worked in journalism were contacted for a telephone interview. All but one were available for interviews. Of those interviewed, 14 had participated in the trauma training.

journalism graduates	84
those who have worked in journalism	42
those available for interviews	41
those who had the trauma training	14

Interviews

The interview protocol involved 16 questions. General questions led into specific questions about whether the respondent had ever handled stories he or she considered difficult. Students who had received the trauma training were asked to comment on the effectiveness of the program, and those who had not received the training were asked to provide suggestions for future trauma training workshops.

What are the issues that Journalism Grads are encountering?

Covering Difficult Stories

Over 84% of the subjects had covered what they defined as difficult stories. The examples ranged from covering the Springfield, Oregon, school shooting in May 1998, to interviewing the parents of a college classmate who had committed suicide. One graduate providing live traffic coverage from a helicopter, witnessed a woman stepping out in front of a truck.

The reporters who experienced trauma were working in positions such as news anchors, producers, and beat reporters. But traumatic incidents were also experienced by those working in such areas as education, social services, sports and reporting in weekly newspapers. "Traumatic incidents" were defined as situations which the reporter found emotionally difficult, particularly those which dealt with tragic injury or loss of life.

types of jobs since graduation	had covered traumatic incidents as a journalist	had not covered traumatic incidents as a journalist
reporter	21	2
producer	4	4
anchor	3	
editor	3	
sports writer	4	
total	35	6
Percentage	84%	16%

Experiencing Emotional Trauma

A surprising 79% of respondents described some emotional effects from their own exposure to deaths, injured people, and th ;se in shock. One reporter was clearly still affected by a past experience when she had arrived at an accident scene at the same time as the police. The victims, whose bodies had not yet been pulled from the wreck, reminded her of her parents, and she described the experience in detail. The reporter who covered the Springfield shooting remembered being told by counselors to stand back and let others grieve. She said: "We were emotionally affected, too." Another described the emotional strain of waiting outside someone's house after a murder, in order to ask questions. Several interviewees acknowledged, "I've never talked about this before but . . ." and then proceeded to tell about traumatic incidents which they still remembered clearly.

Being a New Reporter

Inexperienced reporters often are assigned to interview family members after fatalities. A number of respondents found these duties especially difficult. One remembered an uncomfortable first assignment contacting a spouse within hours of a loved one's death. Another's first case was a triple homicide where one of the victims was five years old. Sometimes inexperience meant that an opportunity to report a story was lost, as one graduate related: "I did a story with a man who--when I asked at the end if there was anything else-- told me 'I just lost my uncle in a drive by shooting.' I didn't know how to treat that . . . he was crying . . . so I ended the interview." The reporter felt that the experience could have resulted in a powerful story if he had known how to handle the situation more effectively.

Dangers to Reporters

One unexpected response was a concern over safety issues. A reporter commented on feeling vulnerable when reporting on a drug related shooting on a site where toxic drugs were being manufactured. Another spoke of driving a news truck under dangerous conditions where the focus was on getting the story rather than on crew safety. A reporter also commented on having known reporters to get lost in the woods or come close to falling off the edge of a cliff.

Handling Newsroom issues

Overwhelmingly, the greatest frustration articulated by graduates was with newsroom priorities that they felt were generally in conflict "with the need to provide a 'shield' for victims." Several interviewees spoke of the lack of sensitivity the producer/editor felt for the job of the reporter and the privacy of the victim. A field producer remembered covering a traumatic event and parking on people's lawns: "I don't want to be there—they don't want us there—but the boss wants us out in the field." Several producers acknowledged that they worried more about the victim when they were in the field than when they were later promoted to the newsroom.

Many had specific stories about newsroom values violating the privacy of victims. An interviewee commented that a reporter at his paper was sent to the door to get a quote from a father after his child had been mauled fatally by a dog. When he came back without the story the editor immediately sent him back to try again to interview the father. Another's comment spoke of the conflicting aspects of her job: "One of the worst things was during a stabbing at a high school in Los Angeles. We were told to go on the grounds and the students were told not to talk to us—so we waited at the curb. At one

point I was chasing junior high kids down with questions—one part of me was disgusted and the other part wanted the story. And I was the education reporter."

One former journalist felt that it was the pressure of editors and news directors which eventually caused him to leave the profession. He cited a particular instance, following a student's suicide, when he interviewed the young man's father. "When he said 'I don't want to talk anymore' I stopped. But my editor sent me back saying we needed more details. Now I'm a police officer. I don't object to being in a trauma situation. I just question whether I have the right to further injure victims by asking them questions."

Handling Trauma and Getting a Good Story

Graduates also spoke of the tension between respecting the privacy of survivors and still getting the story. As one interviewee put it: "You want to be sensitive *and* you want to get the story." Another reporter commented, "When there is a death involved and a family involved it makes it difficult. I went to the drowning of a 14 year old boy and the police were there and asked me not to talk to the family. It made it very difficult." But there was a sense of mastery from those who had learned to handle trauma effectively. For instance, a graduate replied: "We are taught to let whoever is involved in the story tell the story—I was asking questions of [a] father [whose son had been fatally injured and] at the end he hugged me." He felt the father's final response indicated that he had conducted the interview sensitively.

Problems with feeling like a 'Creep'

More than 25% of the respondents had a concern with feeling intrusive. As one put it: "Probably more than anything, I worry about learning how to do the job without

seeming like a creep in that certain way. Nature says let people deal with it—the job tells you to [cover] it." Another graduate said: "I felt like I had to compromise my humanity. I was uncomfortable with my level of intrusion as a reporter." One cited a specific instance: "A 12 year old girl was raped and murdered while babysitting. I had to interview the family. I felt it was their time and why should I be sticking my nose in their business when they needed time to grieve."

Another issue is observing other journalists behave like 'creeps': "I have seen reporters who are awful and they ruin the field for the next guy." Many respondents mentioned how "every station has an example where someone clearly violated ethics." And graduates also spoke of the consequences for these violations: "You don't want to cross over boundaries with the police, it makes them mad and affects your ability to get future stories. We went to a story where another station crossed the line and then they were mad at every news station." One journalist put it this way: "I want the story—it's a good story—but I don't want to be perceived as someone who is talking advantage."

Those who had the training: Benefits

Many of the graduates who had had trauma training at the University of Washington recounted the areas in which they had gained understanding, such as asking if the subject *wants* to talk to you, waiting until the subject is comfortable before you get the story, and resisting asking hard questions right away. While these might seem like common sense approaches (and some who had the training acknowledged they were), it was the 'rehearsal' which graduates felt was valuable. Although no training can

completely prepare you for the situation, it at least alerts you to the possibility and gives you some insights.

Students who had the training offered specific comments about its usefulness. "I had the trauma training. That is exactly the thing that was helpful . . . I think that really taught me something about the basic questions. It was great, very helpful." Another stated "That [training] related very directly to what I do every day. It created a framework of issues to consider when deciding how to report on something. It kept to the forefront my consideration of what was appropriate."

Showing Restraint

The training also helped students to show restraint when dealing with victims: "Once I covered an apartment fire. I approached someone and they just screamed at me. I didn't get an interview. The trauma training was good for handling this kind of situation. Had she been willing to talk, I had the tools to talk to her." Another graduate spoke of benefiting from the techniques taught: "I have used the class, after a runaway was found murdered.. I talked to the mother and sister. I learned that if you just let them speak and don't interrupt you can get the story. They talked for 45 minutes. Those are the things the class taught us—not to be the typical rude media."

Providing an ethical framework

While a few students initially questioned the issues covered in the training, they later found them to be useful: "At the time I felt like we would belabor these little ethical dilemmas. I would think why are we going on about this? Now I know it's good to think about it." Another graduate stated it this way:

"[the training] seems so fake at the time but it sticks in your mind and then you use it."

Creating Sensitivity

Graduates also reported that having the training helped to create sensitivity: "It helped to [have the training. When you are covering trauma] everyone wants to know—how that person is coping—it prevents you from just going up and asking 'how do you feel?'" It can also provide a form of specialized training which may lead to a facility in dealing with victims. Because of the training and subsequent feelings of efficacy covering traumatic incidents, one reporter commented: "I had the training, have used it, and now [I want] to talk to the bereaved. A lot of reporters avoid this but now I welcome the chance to do this."

Should there be trauma training?

All of the 41 interviewees, including the 14 who had the trauma training and the 27 who did not, felt that trauma training was a potentially useful exercise: "No question. A lot of people go into this business not fully understanding the experience we can have. I wish I had had it." One respondent commented that it would be helpful, " for everyone, no matter what job you are in." But graduates also spoke of the necessity of trauma debriefing: "Every time a cop is out on a story they are counseled and debriefed—but we are not. We should have that too."

Limitations of Training

Several graduates mentioned that nothing can completely prepare you for traumatic incidents: " I don't think they really prepare you for the confrontation when you deal with someone whose kid has died or been shot." Several graduates felt that "A lot of [the training] is on the job." One questioned the use of role playing to prepare for

covering tragedy saying : "No simulation can capture it." But even those who suggested limitations of trauma training all felt it had value.

Student Suggestions for Future Training

All former students had suggestions for future trauma training. One suggestion was to prepare students for the probability that they will likely all handle trauma at some point: "You know it's going to happen; you don't know when, and you don't know how it's going to hit." A second suggestion was to "Have them acknowledge the priorities of news directors. Reporters are put in that position all the time. Reporters are put in the position to step on people's boundaries."

Bring in Reporters and Trauma Personnel

Many respondents suggested "having a reporter come in and talk about different ways to approach family, witness and law enforcement officers. There will be different people at the scene and you need to approach them in different ways." Several suggested that it would be good to bring in EMT people; state patrol or a deputy sheriff; emergency room nurses or physicians and police officers who have high exposure to violent crime. Other resources included: public information officers, judges and victims advocates.

Dealing With Danger

Another recommendation was to provide "more information on how to approach violent situations." Reporters have talked about dealing with situations where people have been angry and felt that it would be good to have training about how to handle this. Others talked about dealing with risk: "It would be good to talk to someone about how to be safe. I have talked to reporters who have been in danger." Several graduates felt that

awareness of personal safety issues, which do not seem to be addressed any other place, would be useful during the training.

Secondary Trauma

A large concern is with secondary trauma, the empathic emotional response which reporters, themselves, may experience when exposed to the suffering of others. Several respondents lamented the lack of emotional support reporters receive in the newsroom. "Cops have outlets and counselors to talk to but reporters don't. I have been on scenes when I've seen dead bodies mangled in a car and people who have been murdered-stabbed to death-- and I've never really talked about it. A lot of time we arrive before the cops. We could use help with this." Graduates also pointed out that police officers and other emergency personnel have critical incident stress debriefing, while journalists do not. Some preparation for secondary trauma issues seem useful.

Hearing From Victims

One graduate commented: "I think it would be good to hear from victims about how the media handled their story." Another suggestion was to bring in a panel of victims' families --relatives of victims of murder or accidents --and ask them what a reporter said that hurt or helped. Many felt that hearing from victims would be helpful preparation for sensitivity in future reporting.

More hands on

Those who had the training had specific suggestions such as "Get us more involved." While the original training involves a maximum of six students role playing while the rest of the class observes, several suggested finding a way to have all students practice: "Maybe if you have everyone in the class do interviewing, even just to get

practice with wording. Each of us needs to do it." "Students need to do more than take notes. We all need to practice doing the interviewing."

More Extended Training

A number of graduates spoke of the usefulness of longer training. "There was so little of it. One training in four years of college--there was not enough of it." One recommended having more comprehensive notes to refer back to later on.

Another suggestion was a quarter-long training: "It should be a whole course in handling trauma. It should also be more in depth to weed out people who don't want to interview trauma survivors."

A quarter-long course on trauma could have several advantages such as more comprehensive training for interviewing and preparation for secondary stress. This course could serve to provide both information and writing opportunities. The curriculum could involve opportunities for interviewing volunteers who are past trauma survivors as well as role playing situations. Experts such as emergency workers, victim advocates or reporters could be called in to talk about their experiences and suggestions.

Conclusion

The results of this survey indicate that all graduates see trauma training as a worthwhile exercise for journalism students in order to address trauma victims appropriately. The interviews also indicated that the majority of journalism graduates, in this study, have been exposed to traumatic incidents in their job assignments. These traumatic situations, ranging from watching bodies being extracted from car wrecks, reporting on a school shootings, riding in news trucks down dangerous country roads in the middle of the night, have, to some degree, have had an emotional impact on almost

all of those new journalists who have experienced them. Responses suggest the need for more professional support for the personal trauma journalists may experience.

The comments from graduates have also provided further insight into the situations graduates face as they enter the journalism field. These results reinforce the importance of trauma training and underscore the usefulness of continuing to refine the trauma training program at the University of Washington. And favorable student responses also support the merits of instituting trauma training in other journalism schools beyond the programs which are already in place at Michigan State University in East Lansing, the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond, and Queensland University of Technology in Australia.

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